

# U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Staff Research Report



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## **Diminishing China-North Korea Exchanges: An Assessment**

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# Introduction

This report seeks to quantify changes in the bilateral relationship between China and North Korea by examining hundreds of discrete exchanges between Chinese and North Korean officials as reported by the Director of National Intelligence Open Source Center (OSC) from January 2009 to December 2014.<sup>1</sup> The authors categorized these exchanges by type (cultural, economics and trade, health, military, party-to-party, tourism, and science and technology) and by seniority of the participants (see Figure 1) and evaluated trends in these categories over time.\* Finally, this report assesses trends in China-North Korea exchanges in the context of overall China-North Korea bilateral relations.

## Key Findings

Trends in the frequency and content of China-North Korea exchanges between 2009 and 2014 appear to support the assessment, widely shared in the China- and North Korea-watching communities, that relations between Beijing and Pyongyang have soured in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Since 2010, the number of reported high-, senior-, and presidential-level exchanges has fallen significantly, and in 2014 reached its lowest point in six years (see Figure 2). Though OSC reported three times as many China-North Korea exchanges in 2014 as in 2009, this increase was due primarily to the tripling of reported low- and medium-level exchanges, which rarely produced major policy outcomes (see Figure 3).<sup>†</sup>

**Figure 1. Seniority Levels of China-North Korea Exchanges**

Level of Exchange		Parties to Exchange <sup>‡</sup>
Lower-Level Exchanges	Low-Level	Minor academic, bureaucratic, consular, corporate, expatriate, local government, tourist, and/or youth delegations
	Medium-Level	Ambassadors, low-ranking representatives of prominent government organizations and ministries, and/or members of the National People’s Congress (China) and Supreme People’s Assembly (North Korea)
Upper-Level Exchanges <sup>§</sup>	High-Level	Vice ministers, low-ranking general officers in the Chinese and North Korea militaries, and/or nonranking members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the Central Committee and Politburo of the Workers’ Party of Korea
	Senior-Level	Premiers, vice premiers, vice presidents (China), cabinet ministers, Politburo Standing Committee members (China), Central Military Commission members (China), high-ranking general officers in the Chinese and North Korean militaries, ranking members of the Central Committee and Politburo of the Workers’ Party of Korea, president and vice president of the Supreme People’s Assembly Presidium (North Korea), and/or state councilors (China)
	Presidential-Level	President (China) and/or supreme leader (North Korea)

Leadership changes in China and North Korea could suggest an explanation for the decline in upper-level exchanges. In December 2011, North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il passed away, and his son, Kim Jong-un, succeeded him as supreme leader. In 2012, at the beginning of Kim Jong-un’s reign, China was preparing for its once-in-a-decade leadership transition. The uncertainty surrounding both of these leadership transitions could explain the drop in upper-level exchanges from 2011 to 2012: each country’s administration may have focused attention on its own domestic politics at the expense of maintaining the bilateral relationship. Since 2013, however,

\* Although OSC reporting on China-North Korea exchanges is robust and reliable, it should not be considered comprehensive as it may not account for all exchanges, such as secret or unreported exchanges. Moreover, the content and relevance of individual exchanges is often unclear due to a lack of publicly available information.

† Much of the increase in low-level exchanges was due to a rise in cultural, economics and trade, tourism, and science and technology exchanges.

‡ Exchanges involving officials of different seniority levels are categorized according to the seniority level of the highest-level official involved in the exchange.

§ Upper-level exchanges include only substantive interactions between upper-level officials. They do not include ceremonial events (e.g., wreath-layings) or official announcements and communications (e.g., letter correspondence).

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the frequency of upper-level exchanges has not returned to the level seen during the administrations of President Hu Jintao and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il. The overall drop in upper-level exchanges since 2013 suggests declining China-North Korea exchanges are the product of a conscious decision by one or both of the administrations of President Xi Jinping and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un.

Notably, upper-level exchanges between party officials appear to have ceased completely (see Figure 4). Previously, the close historical relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Workers' Party of Korea had been the foundation and primary vehicle for conducting the bilateral relationship,<sup>3</sup> but nearly all upper-level exchanges are now explicitly government sponsored: they occur through official bureaucratic and diplomatic channels, rather than by the friendly and often informal party-to-party meetings that were common until 2013.

## What Does This Mean for the Future of China-North Korea Relations?

Public meetings and exchanges, particularly between upper-level officials, are important not only for cultivating productive working relationships between two countries, but also for signaling to domestic and foreign audiences the importance each side assigns to bilateral ties. In the case of China-North Korea bilateral contacts, projecting amicable ties does not appear to be a priority for at least one (and maybe both) of the countries. This perception becomes more compelling when contrasted with China's warming relations with South Korea in recent years. Observers are quick to point out that President Xi has met with South Korean President Park Gyeun-hye seven times but has yet to meet Kim Jong-un,<sup>4</sup> a striking fact given that China is a longtime ally of North Korea (which is still technically at war with South Korea).

The decline in China-North Korea exchanges is one of several recent developments that suggest an overall souring of the bilateral relationship.\*

- Since late 2012, North Korea has drawn criticism from China and others with a series of tests demonstrating its ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities. In December 2012, a North Korean rocket put the country's first satellite into orbit, likely using ballistic missile technology in violation of United Nations resolutions.<sup>5</sup> In February 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in eight years.<sup>6</sup> In 2014, North Korea fired more than 100 projectiles over the course of at least 18 missile tests—at least ten of which used ballistic missile technology in violation of United Nations resolutions—according to open source reporting.<sup>7</sup>
- Parallel to Beijing's outreach to Seoul, Pyongyang has sought to diversify its foreign relations by reaching out to its former patron Russia, Japan, and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>8</sup>
- Kim Jong-un unexpectedly purged and executed Jang Song-taek, his uncle and second-highest official in North Korea, in December 2013. Mr. Jang had been the chief North Korean agent in North Korea's engagement with China, and official North Korean statements about the circumstances of his purge and execution suggest his relationship with China was treasonous.<sup>9</sup> The event stunned and upset Chinese officials, and Mr. Jang's execution likely has had the effect of discouraging other North Korean officials from seeking close ties with Beijing.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the deterioration of China-North Korea bilateral contacts and the overall decline in China-North Korea relations do not seem to reflect a shift away from China's long-standing strategic objective of stability<sup>†</sup> in North Korea. China's perception that the United States seeks to encircle and contain China with regional alliances and partnerships shapes its fear that North Korean instability or collapse could provide a pretext for U.S. military intervention and allow Washington greater influence over the future of the Peninsula.<sup>11</sup> China's overriding imperative to avoid this scenario drives its economic and political support for Pyongyang despite rising tension in the bilateral relationship. North Korea, for its part, is in no position to reject China's support. Dr. Sue Mi Terry, senior research scholar at Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute, testified to the Commission that "by some estimates, Beijing provides some 80 percent of North Korea's consumer goods, 45 percent of its food,

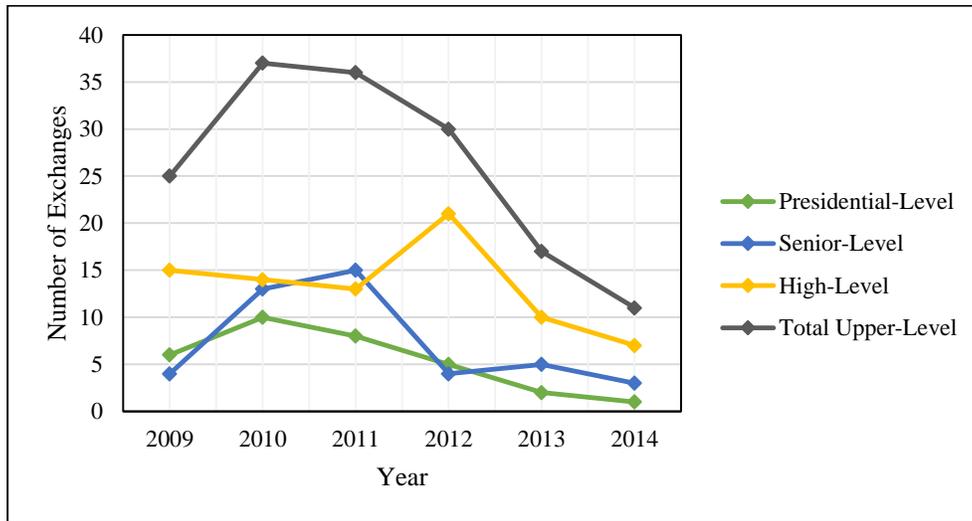
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\* For an in-depth discussion of China's troubled relationship with North Korea, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2014 Annual Report to Congress*, p. 446-469.

† Stability, in China's perception, is characterized by the absence of unrest, upheaval, or other sudden shifts in a country's internal situation, and often is synonymous with regime stability.

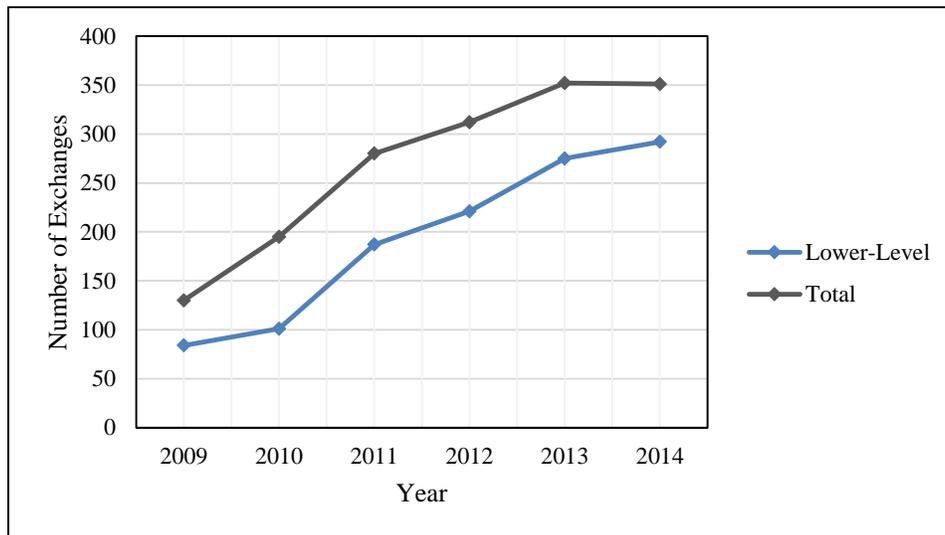
and 90 percent of its energy imports. Sino-North Korean trade accounts for nearly 90 percent of North Korea’s global trade, while official Chinese investment accounts for almost 95 percent of foreign direct investment in the North.”<sup>12</sup> As long as these dynamics sustain, Beijing is unlikely to significantly change its policy toward North Korea.

**Figure 2. Upper-Level Exchanges between Chinese and North Korean Officials, 2009–2014.**



Source: Commission staff judgments based on data from Open Source Center *PRC-DPRK Exchange Charts*, 2009–2014.

**Figure 3. Lower-Level Exchanges and Total Exchanges between Chinese and North Korean Officials, 2009–2014.**



Source: Commission staff judgments based on data from Open Source Center *PRC-DPRK Exchange Charts*, 2009–2014.

**Figure 4. Upper-Level Party-to-Party Exchanges between Chinese and North Korean Officials, 2009–2014.**

Level of Meeting	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Presidential-Level	2	4	1	3	0	0
Senior-Level	1	0	3	0	0	0
High-Level	2	0	0	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Source: Commission staff judgments based on data from Open Source Center *PRC-DPRK Exchange Charts*, 2009–2014.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Open Source Center, *PRC-DPRK Exchange Charts*. OSC IDs: KPP20100126032001, KPP20100423032001, KPP20100709032002, KPP20101005032001, KPP20110114032002, KPP20110408032007, KPP20110830032002, KPP20111020032004, KPP20120119032002, KPP20120405032002, KPP20120827032002, KPP20121026032001, KPP20130117032001, KPP20130415032001, KPR2013071219948731, KPO2013102811769617, KPR2014032519725582, KPO2014041423869917, KPR2014072121546812, KPR2014102725433732, and KPR2015012312127978.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2014 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2014, pp. 448–458; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on Recent Developments in China's Relations with Taiwan and North Korea*, written testimony of Sue Mi Terry, June 5, 2014; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on Recent Developments in China's Relations with Taiwan and North Korea*, testimony of Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, June 5, 2014; and Scott Snyder and See-won Byun, “China-Korea Relations: China’s Red Line on the Korean Peninsula,” *Comparative Connections: A Triannual e-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations* 16:1 (May 2014): 103. [http://csis.org/files/publication/1401qchina\\_korea.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/1401qchina_korea.pdf). Several interlocutors with whom the Commission met during its July 2014 trip to Seoul, South Korea, echoed this assessment.
- <sup>3</sup> Bates Gill, *China's North Korea Policy* (United States Institute of Peace, July 2011), p. 6. [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/China%27s\\_North\\_Korea\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/China%27s_North_Korea_Policy.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Jonathan D. Pollack, *Is Xi Jinping Rethinking Korean Unification?* (Brookings Institution, January 20, 2015). <http://www.brookings.edu/research/presentations/2015/01/20-xi-jinping-korean-unification-pollack>; Scott Snyder and See-won Byun, “China-Korea Relations: China’s Red Line on the Korean Peninsula,” *Comparative Connections: A Triannual e-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations* 16:1 (May 2014). [http://csis.org/files/publication/1401qchina\\_korea.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/1401qchina_korea.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Duyeon Kim, North Korea’s Successful Rocket Launch (Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, December 18, 2012). [http://armscontrolcenter.org/issues/northkorea/articles/north\\_koreas\\_successful\\_rocket\\_launch/](http://armscontrolcenter.org/issues/northkorea/articles/north_koreas_successful_rocket_launch/).
- <sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, *Fire on the City Gate: Why China Keeps North Korea Close* (December 9, 2013), p. 8. [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/254-fire-on-the-city-gate-why-china-keeps-north-korea-close.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/254-fire-on-the-city-gate-why-china-keeps-north-korea-close.pdf).
- <sup>7</sup> Choonsik Yoo, “UPDATE 2-North Korea Fires Short-Range Missiles in Apparent Exercise,” Reuters, February 27, 2014. <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/02/27/korea-north-missiles-idINL3N0LW3SG20140227>; Ashley Rowland and Yoo Kyong Chang, “North Korea Launches 2 More Missiles, South Says,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 2, 2014. <http://www.stripes.com/news/pacific/north-korea-launches-2-more-missiles-south-says-1.270832>; Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea Tests Rocket Launcher with Range Beyond Seoul, South Says,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/world/asia/north-korea-tests-rocket-launcher-with-longer-range-south-says.html>; Judy Kwon and Halimah Abdullah, “North Korea Launches Missiles into Sea,” CNN, March 6, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/27/world/asia/north-korea-missiles/>; Paula Hancocks and K.J. Kwon, “North Korea Fires Short-Range Rockets, South Says,” CNN, March 17, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/16/world/asia/nkorea-missile-launches/>; K.J. Kwon and Ben Brumfield, “North Korea Launches 30 Short-Range Rockets into the Sea, South Korea Says,” CNN, March 22, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/22/world/asia/north-korea-rockets/index.html>; Euan McKirdy, “North Korea Ups Stakes with Latest Missile Launch,” CNN, March 26, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/26/world/asia/north-korea-rodong-missile-launch/>; Louis Charbonneau, “U.N. Security Council Members Condemn North Korea Missile Launch,” Reuters, March 27, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/28/us-korea-north-un-idUSBREA2Q2E220140328>; Jonathan Cheng, “North Korea Hypes ‘New’ Missile Launch,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2014. <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2014/06/27/north-korea-hypes-new-missile-launch/>; Narae Kim, “North Korea Launches Two Missiles, Defies UN Ban,” Reuters, June 29, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/29/us-northkorea-missiles-idUSKBN0F405H20140629>; Jonathan Cheng, “In Run-Up to Xi Visit, North Korea Seeks Spotlight,” *Korea Real Time Report* (Wall Street Journal blog), June 30, 2014. <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2014/06/30/in-run-up-to-xi-visit-north-korea-seeks-spotlight/>; K.J. Kwon and Jethro Mullen, “North Korea Fires Two ShortRange Rockets into Sea,” CNN, July 1, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/01/world/asia/north-korea-missiles/>; Jung-Yoon Choi and Hyung-Jin Kim, “North Korea Fires Missiles into Ocean,” Associated Press, July 8, 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/08/north-korea-missiles\\_n\\_5568880.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/08/north-korea-missiles_n_5568880.html); Jeyup S. Kwaak, “North Korea Launches Two Short-Range Missiles,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/articles/north-korea-launches-two-short-range-missiles-1405222190>; Yonhap News Agency, “N. Korea Fires Two Ballistic Missiles: Seoul,” July 13, 2014. <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2014/07/13/26/0301000000AEN20140713000253315F.html>; Associated Press, “North Korea has Launched Nearly 100 Missile and Rocket Tests in 2014 as Kim Jong-un Seeks World’s Attention,” July 14, 2014. <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/07/14/north-korea-has-launched-nearly-100-missile-and-rocket-tests-in-2014-as-kim-jong-un-seeks-worlds-attention/>; Associated Press, “North Korea Fires Short-Range Missile into Sea,” July 26, 2014. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jul/26/north-korea-fires-short-range-missile-sea/>; Associated Press, “North Korea Test-Fires Missiles as Pope Visits South,” August 14, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/14/north-korea-missile-test-pope-francis-south>; Tass (Moscow), “North Korea Fires Short-Range Ballistic Missile into Sea of Japan - media,” September 1, 2014. <http://en.itar-tass.com/world/747478>; and Choe Sang-Hun, “North Korea Reported to Test Short-Range Missiles,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/06/world/asia/north-korea-reported-to-test-short-range-missiles.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2014 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2014, pp. 452–453.
- <sup>9</sup> Christopher Woolf, “Execution Challenges North Korea's Friendship with China,” Public Radio International, December 13, 2013. <http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-12-13/execution-challenges-north-koreas-friendship-china>; Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *China-North Korea Relations: Jang Song-thaek's Purge vs. The Status Quo* (Asia Centre, February 2014), p. 2. [http://www.centreasia.eu/sites/default/files/publications\\_pdf/note\\_china\\_north\\_korea\\_relations\\_after\\_jang\\_song\\_thaek\\_s\\_purge\\_february2014\\_0.pdf](http://www.centreasia.eu/sites/default/files/publications_pdf/note_china_north_korea_relations_after_jang_song_thaek_s_purge_february2014_0.pdf); and Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, *The Demise of Jang Song Thaek* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 13, 2013).

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